

Technical Report

(SERVICES IN URBAN INDIA :
A NON-ELITIST PERSPECTIVE)

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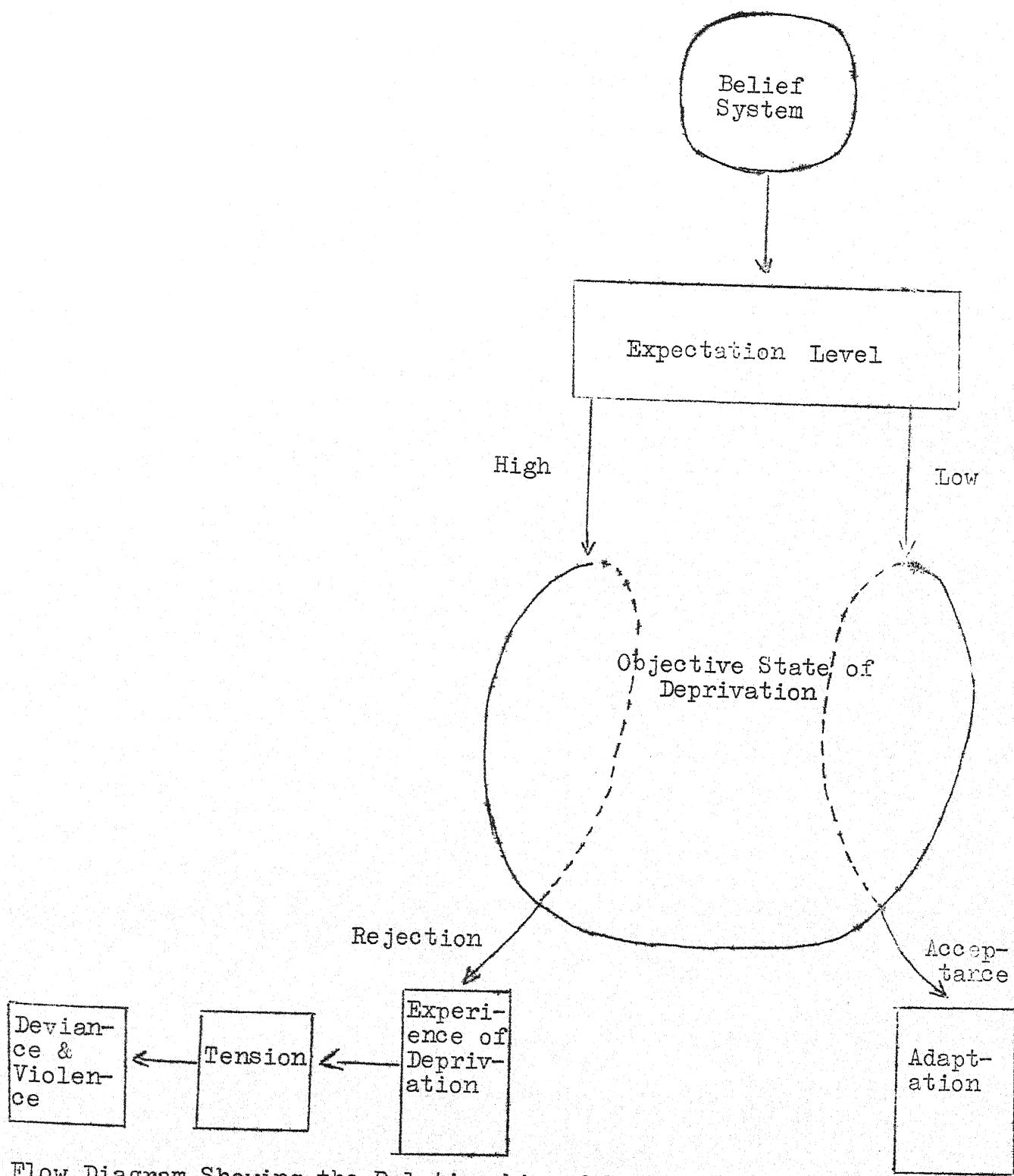
H.S. VERMA

In most cases, the question of services in urban area is discussed in terms of norms and standards - expressed in various types of ratios - , use of technologies and availability of finances. It is our submission, however, that these are subsidiary issues : the main issue is the character of the city which is determined by the planning concept when the city is being planned and structuring, recasting, and remodelling of the original concept by the vested interests when the city has grown over a period of time. It is not an entirely unknown fact that the norms of services once fixed can not be maintained for long even in case of new cities : they can not be possibly maintained as the cities grow old. 1/ Availability and adequacy of services has direct relationship with the health of the urban areas; for, the degree to which the citizens could ensure these for themselves is very limited. The only alternative which they are left with is to either make adjustments, adaptations, and improvisations to the system imposed on them or give organised expression to their tensions, frustrations, hopelessness, powerlessness and despondency in the shape of protests, deviance and violence (Diagram I).

* The paper draws heavily from the author's experience at the City and Industrial Development Corporation of Maharashtra Ltd., Bombay as their Social Services Planner and his later consultancy research assignments dealing with the relationship of social services with the urban tensions in India's metropolitan centres.

In revising an earlier draft, the author has benefitted from the comments of Institute colleagues, T.S. Papola, V.N. Misra and Bhanwar Singh. However, he alone is accountable for the contents of the paper.

1 Urban planners seldom concede the point that once the city planning crosses the drawing board stage and the plans start taking physical shape, the planners themselves retain very little control over their actualization, the various regulatory systems notwithstanding. It is the vested interests which sit in the driver's seat and steer the development then.



Flow Diagram Showing the Relationship of Beliefs and Expectations of Urban Services with the Consequences of Their Availability and Non-Availability

The objective of this paper is very limited : it only offers a non-elitist perspective on services in urban India. The paper itself is organised in four sections. The first three examine the question of standards of services and facilities in the urban areas in three situation-specific contexts : (a) the existing cities where their growth and in-migration has outstripped the development of commensurate services and facilities; (b) the small towns which are towns in terms of population size alone and where planning of services and facilities - indeed the planning of the towns themselves - does not exist; and (c) the new towns/cities either being established as satellites to the existing metro/urban centres or in their own-new-found-independent hinterland : the fourth section discusses some flaws in the traditional urban planning theory.

I : Services in the Existing Cities/Towns

The question of services in the existing cities/towns really is a question dealing with their original conceptual profile and how the same has been shaped subsequently. Issues such as their availability and maintenance of uniform standards - in terms of location, space, finances and trade offs - are consequently to be seen in conjunction with these two points. It is on these two points that we confine our observations.

When the existing cities were built, a certain conscious effort had gone in to their planning and initial execution. 2/ It needs to be emphasised that they were all created with a

2 It is quite another issue that these exercises now appear, in retrospect, rudimentary and unsatisfactory in their sophistication and class-orientation. For a case study illustrating this dimension, see H.S. Verma, Metropolitan Centres : Allotment and Use of Land for Social Services, The Economic Times, July 17, 1976.

definite 'brief' and a class-bias. 3/ Their initial development and growth proceeded, more or less, on the defined lines. However, as time passed and the cities expanded through internal growth and external in-flows the initial conceptual framework and socio-economic composition used for their planning went haywire : people belonging to such classes as were not originally planned to live in the cities came there, first in a trickle, then in waves and finally in torrents. Pressed for space, the urban shapes spread in all the directions. Some of them had some geographical barrier to their physical spread and consequently, started growing vertically by unsettling some of the earlier defined land uses. Others continued their growth by expanding their fringe, in one, two, three or all four directions.

This had fourfold effect on the urban services. 4/ Firstly, this unplanned growth characterised disproportionate use of land for various functions in which the non-elites suffered the utmost. While the size of the cities kept on leap-frogging, the number of units to service their resident and transitory populations 5/ did not keep pace with it. Secondly,

- 3 Not many social scientists have thought on these lines. Among the few that have, see H. Spodek, Rulers, Merchants and Others in a City of Saurashtra, Around 1800, Comparative Studies in Society and History, 16 : 1974 : 448-70; Satish Saberwal, Indian Urbanism : A Socio-historical Perspective, Contributions to Indian Sociology (New Series), 11 (1) : 1977 : 1-19; Sunil Munshi, Calcutta : Classes and Class Policies in Metropolitan Development, Social Scientist, 6 (6-7) : 1978 : 14-24; and J.V.R. Rao, Urbanization in India (forthcoming).
- 4 For a detailed discussion of these in respect of Greater Bombay, see H.S. Verma, Municipal Taxes and Civic Facilities in Greater Bombay (Bombay, 1973); Managing Urban Housing Problems : Some Guidelines, Mainstream, July 22, 1973; How Good Are Educational Facilities in Greater Bombay ?, The Economic Times, August 25, 1974; Public Health and Medical Care in Greater Bombay, The Economic Times, October 13, 1974; and Backbay Reclamation : Myth and Reality, The Economic Times, November 2, 1974.
- 5 Planning services for the transitory population is seldom done by the urban planners and yet, when the size of this inflow is as high as 2-3 lakhs per day, the demand on the existing ones, established for the resident population alone, are staggering.

the location of services and facilities, originally worked out to a certain given equilibrium with the resident population, became unworkable and, in turn, produced a problem of flows. As the pressure on the public services increased private institutions sprung up to cope up with the increasing demand and the elite institutions acquired the exclusiveness of a firmer sort which they did not have before. Thirdly, capital and operating costs registered increases, slowly to begin with but sharply after a certain stage slowing down the accretion to the number of new units being established. Fourthly, certain type of services and facilities started trade offs of the land uses making the use of even the available facilities more complicated on the time dimension. 6/

Qualitative implications of this historical process of urban development were very far reaching. While the sheer weight of numbers kept the standards of the services for the non-elites way down, 7/ those for the elites maintained theirs. In fact, some private new units, coming under the garb of "non-profit making institutions" - and catering mostly to the affluent - enabled these standards to touch new heights. Thus, as the teeming millions seethed and groaned, had to put up with all sorts of difficulties, deprivations, and frustrations, the well-to-do remained largely unaffected. On the one hand, cries for big cities going to the dogs continued among the elites and 'big plans' for arresting the urban blight made headline news, not much money was forthcoming from the state and central governments to really implement the 'development plans' for the benefit of the poor. A dual urban society became a living reality wherein the complaints from the elites always got promptly redressed : when it came to taking up something for the have-nots most of the time there was no money available.

- 6 Take the case of educational institutions in a city like Bombay. Some of them have as many as three shifts. It is not only that these have ceased to be educational institutions and have indeed become factories : they have also put considerable restraints on the movements of the parents, and changed the traffic mix significantly.
- 7 That is if the services themselves were available to them in the first instance.

It is not that the elites constitute a numerical majority in each city and that the problems afflicting the majority (i.e. the poor) would not affect them at any stage of a city's history. Sure enough, they affect them, directly or indirectly at a late stage of urban blight when they start taking notice of them. 8/ By that time the cost of solving the acutest among the acute problems has, however, skyrocketed to such geometric proportions that the solutions in each case had to be financed by the World Bank. 9/ Uncle Sam gives money on his terms and it turns out that sanction of funds for such measures is always dovetailed with the changes in the service-charges, administrative structures and technologies used. 10/

The question of maintaining standards of services and amenities in this kind of context became really the question of which services and for whom ? The elitist sections stood to gain through this mechanism 11/ and that is precisely the reason why no lesson seems to have been learnt from so many historical crises in urban India.

II : Services in the Small Towns

In the colonial system of government which the independent India inherited from the British - and the basic essentials of which remain intact even today - , the question of settlement planning has been operationalized only in case of the urban

- 8 This late admission is not due to any altruistic motive : the plain fact then is that they start feeling the pinch of the problems that were, till then, only troubling the others.
- 9 Take the transport problems in cities like Calcutta and Bombay as instances. Solutions like the RTS (i.e. Tubes) being executed now need finances in the neighbourhood of Rs. 1000 crores in each case.
- 10 See, for example, the case history of the sanctioning of loan to the BEST, Bombay by the World Bank.
- 11 Delay inflates the cost and forces choices favouring use of capital intensive technologies. The architects, engineers, contractors, and builders all get a higher percentage and have a vested interest in such solutions.

areas. 12/ Planning as an abstract exercise managed by the Planning Commission has been a centralized venture totally divorced from the needs of the local eco-systems in which the latter had to adjust to the specific programmes handed down from New Delhi. Among the galaxy of planners working in this organization, no one appears to have so far adequately realized that as the bigger villages grew, they were to become towns. Certain amount of settlement and land use planning had to be done to ensure some modicum of their orderly graduation to the status of urban systems. This practice continues even today. In all such cases, all that the Government does is to issue a Gazette notification declaring a certain settlement as an urban area, the actual nomenclature depending strictly on its population size. Perspective planning of these newly christianed units does not follow immediately. The elected local government which comes into existence in these units is not endowed with planning expertise any way : even the law does not make it mandatory for them to immediately launch physical planning exercises and guide the growth in a decided direction. All that they do is to meet statutory requirements of having all such services which the municipal acts stipulate. It does not necessarily mean a qualitative change in the standards of services already available to the citizens although all the well-to-do local elites tend to converge on such points. 13/

12 The forcible rearrangement of physical settlements of border nationalities like the Nagas in Nagaland by the Indian army under different Indian Prime-Ministers has been an exception to this. However, the motive in going through these exercises has been to gain advantage from a military point of view : it has certainly not been rural settlement planning. For an interesting discussion on the theme of sociological changes in post-independence period in the North-East India, see S.M. Dubey (ed.), North-East India : A Sociological Study, (New Delhi, Concept, 1977).

13 Perhaps, that is because they are not dependent on the local settlement administration for crucial services on the one hand and their ability to bend the system to their needs, should the situation so require on the other.

The thinking in higher government echelons has been that the people in the villages and the small towns do not really need quite a few of the social services : amenities for them are mentioned only vaguely. Thus, in the priorities used in the allocation of finances, opening of new services and strengthening of the existing ones larger towns and cities got preferences over the same demands from the small towns and the villages. Consequently, the citizens from these places come to larger towns/cities to avail them : it has never been the practice to carry the services right to the doorsteps - or atleast to the nearest pint - of their users.

III : Services in New Towns/Cities

One of the advantages of urban planning exercises in case of the new towns/cities is that the planner starts, relatively speaking, with a clean slate. The question of standards of services in such cases becomes totally dependent on (a) what the new town is planned to be ? (b) who the planners are and what value judgements they have used in the planning process ? and (c) what technological and conceptual measures have been taken to actuate the decided plan ? 14/

Since it is very relevant to the issues referred to above, New Bombay's experience is briefly recalled here. 15/

14 For a critical discussion on this theme, see H.S. Verma, Ashvin K. Parikh & S.K. Gupta, City Planning : Uncertainties and Pitfalls, The Economic Times, June 11, 1974. How the values of the planners decide the standards of services in an empirical situation of this nature, see H.S. Verma, Social Infrastructure in New Bombay, in Draft Action Plan for New Bombay, (Bombay, CIDCO Ltd. 1974); Social Infrastructure in the Central Business District, in Draft Action Plan for Belapur Township, (Bombay, CIDCO Ltd. 1974) : Social Infrastructure in Vashi, in Draft Action Plan for Vashi Township, (Bombay, CIDCO Ltd. 1974); and Post-Secondary Education in New Bombay : Its Financial Implications, The Economic Times, October 4, 1974.

15 For a fuller account, see H.S. Verma and Ashvin K. Parikh, Planned Urban Development : the New Bombay Experiment, (forthcoming).

- (a) By the late sixties, Bombay's growth and net in-migration had reached such dimensions that even the elites were getting affected by its dys-functional symptoms. The city was laying the proverbial golden egg and was too good to be abandoned or written off. The powers that be did not really want a serious decongestion drive 16/ : for, this would have cut their own interests. Some alternative was to be found which would "siphon off" the unwanted millions from settling in Greater Bombay and would also attract those 'who were making the great city stink'.
- (b) Some professionals in the business of city planning and forming part of the elite interests worked out a neat plan to bring this about. 17/
- (c) The chalked out strategy was to start a series of studies concerning 3 major urban agglomerations in Maharashtra (Bombay, Pune and Nagpur) so that Bombay's case did not stand out very prominently. These reports were to be discussed at a later stage in a high level conference in which the state government and its allies were represented very adequately. The idea was to manoeuvre a recommendation from the "experts" for a visualised city near Bombay which would meet the exigencies of the situation.
- (d) The Thana-Belapur petro-chemical complex covering parts of Thana and Kolaba - the two most backward districts on the outer fringe of Greater Bombay - with an investment around Rs. 1500 Crores and the area nearby across the Thana Creek on the mainland had triggered off some development in that area. The Nhava-Shava port was being located in the same vicinity 18/ and one or two industrial houses were angling for another 2-3 major petro-chemical projects. Together these provided spatial answer to this design.

16 This would have scared away the new investment and probably would have also led to the flight of the existing industrial units outside Maharashtra.

17 One group among them floated the idea of a counter-magnet through an article which was highly publicized.

18 The question is still engaging the 'attention' of the Planning Commission, despite the facts that three separate expert groups have laboured on its feasibility on three different occasions.

(e) The steps, referred to above, were gone through with consummate skill at the end of which the Maharashtra government and the concerned industrial houses got an "expert endorsement" of a plan which had been their baby all along. An urban development corporation was promptly formed giving it mandate of planning and implementing development plans throughout the state under the Maharashtra Town Planning Act. 19/ A former Municipal Commissioner of Greater Bombay was made its first Managing Director and the experts in the planning business, who guided the conceptualization phase and the representatives of business houses were put in key honorary positions in this corporation. 20/

(f) This corporation, named CIDCO Ltd., acquired an impressive array of young indigenous talent for its planning division. However, organisationally the institution came to acquire a split personality as the Managing Director (i.e. the bureaucrat) and the Technical Advisor (i.e. one of the experts in the planning business) divided their spheres of influence on plan implementation and planning respectively, from the very beginning. The Planning Division itself had as many as 11 Task Forces each under the tender care of an outside consultant. 21/

(g) This organisational arrangement ensured that whatever standards of services and details of planning came out as end-products of the labours of various Task Forces conformed to the original design. The state Government, of course, still retained the vetoing power on the overall plan developed for New Bombay.

19 This is not to suggest that the entire Cabinet was in its favour. However, the fact of the matter is that it became a government decision.

20 For a discussion about implications of the use of outside planning experts in a public corporation, see H.S. Verma et al, City Planning : Uncertainties and Pitfalls, The Economic Times, June 11, 1974.

21 One of the many advantages of this arrangement was that whereas the outsiders could force their view-points on the organisation they were not accountable in case something went wrong.

- (h) The young talent in the Planning Division, however, managed to incorporate in the Draft Plan for New Bombay such concepts as would ensure reasonably better standards of services to the New Bombay citizens. As they were professionals, they had taken care to cover the financial angle through a system of trade-offs. As they planned, and as compared to Greater Bombay, New Bombay was going to be a better city to live in.
- (i) An interesting development at this stage was an internal fight between three industrial houses 22/ - the ones which had supported the idea of New Bombay - over location of a major petro-chemical complex in New Bombay. One of these had earlier been first refused licence for its gigantic project combining power generation, fertilizer production and irrigation in the western region but later on granted licence for a very much truncated one, only a fertilizer plant. This industrial house along with the second one had great stake in New Bombay and did not want the third one to have a decisive say there. The first two say to it that the third was refused permission by CIDCO to locate this petro-chemical complex in New Bombay.
- (j) The vested interests had hoped to frustrate the CIDCO professionals when it came to running of services in New Bombay's first township, by refusing funds on a scale recommended. Ordinarily this would have brought the standards down but the CIDCO professionals, anticipating such steps, had worked out some contingency plans which would have kept the services at the same level without the state government's full financial support. 23/
- (k) This took the bottom out of the original design of the vested interests. In their schema, New Bombay was visualised as a colony for the middle and lower income groups and its services were expected to be certainly not better than those of Greater Bombay. The CIDCO planners had thrown a spanner into their neat plans. Some thing had to be done to bring their plan back on the rails.

22 Out of these, two were on one side in this fight.

23 Among other things these included involvement of reputed voluntary agencies in running key services.

(l) The housing units in New Bombay's first township (i.e. Vashi) were to be given to only the planned categories of people. ^{24/} CIDCO professionals had forewarned the management that the targeted people on their own would not be able to purchase these units, ^{25/} and the management had plans of working out a system of financial support to the purchasers with the help of LIC and a number of nationalised banks. At a signal sent by the vested interests, this was not pursued and even the managements of industrial units from the Thana-Belapur belt, working in a concerted manner, went back on their pledges to purchase agreed number of houses. An acute financial crisis had been created for the CIDCO. ^{26/}

(m) Since the vested interests could not change the standards of services in New Bombay, it was inherent from the logic of the situation that the well-to-do must be allowed to come to New Bombay. As the organisation was functioning, CIDCO at that point was not very amenable to their point of view. The financial crisis, however, provided the excuse to the Maharashtra government to intervene. 'To set the matters right', a second M.D. was drafted to the CIDCO. CIDCO's organisational powers were so changed as to give the second M.D. a virtual veto in everything. Since he could not change the plan itself, ^{27/} he deviated in its implementation by denying funds for social services and selling the constructed houses in the first township, i.e. Vashi to unplanned and unintended people.

24 These included : (a) those working in the Thana-Belapur chemical complex; (b) those working and/or having shopping/ other establishments in the Agricultural Marketing complex of MAFCO near Vashi; (c) employees of CIDCO and its sister-institutions, and (d) project affected people.

25 Studies sponsored by CIDCO - and carried out by Social Scientists from academic institutions under the supervision of CIDCO planners - had predicted this. CIDCO management was well advised on this issue by Social Services Group, headed by the author. An economist had even authored a note with as dramatic a title as "CIDCO Goes Red" on this issue.

26 The gravity of the situation could well be judged from the fact that about 80% of its total capital stood locked up at Vashi with very few purchasers around.

27 He needed endorsement from the professionals to "succeed in doing so and this was not forthcoming.

(n) Inspite of above steps, New Bombay would have exercised profound impact on Greater Bombay - in particular its commercial interests - as the Backbay Reclamation scheme had been put to a temporary halt 28/ - because of a persistent campaign by the Save Bombay Committee - and Bandra-Kurla scheme had been a non-starter from the very beginning. This would have not been allowed to go on without hurting the territorial sector; for, New Bombay, Bandra-Kurla and Backbay developments formed a triangle which affected growth in the entire Bombay region. The Bandra-Kurla scheme was, consequently, given to CIDCO itself and its first set of land use proposals favouring low cost housing were changed to make room for commercial complexes. 29/ Only a few minor government offices were promised to be shifted to Konkan Bhavan, in the CBD of New Bombay.

(o) All sorts of hindrances were created for making services and amenities available to New Bombay's first township. 30/ In the years that followed, Backbay Reclamation development has been resumed. Even the chemical complex of one industrial house, earlier vetoed by the CIDCO, has now been okayed. New Bombay's first township has been, however, functional for about 4 years now and various other nodes are in different stages of their development.

28 For juxtaposing promises and percepts on the Backbay issue, see H.S. Verma, Backbay Reclamation : Myth and Reality, op cit.

29 This included the Western gimmick of a drive-in theatre and the like.

30 For example, milk supply, promised by the Bombay Dairy (Worli) was denied at the eleventh hour; buses between Dadar and Thana via Vashi and later to Belapur and Panvel were allowed to run only after a great deal of commotion with the MSRTC; school was allowed to function only after the personal intervention of a very high politician.

Only a detailed historical study would show the extent to which the two viewpoints - those of CIDCO planners and the vested interest - have succeeded in New Bombay. However, the experience has certain historical lessons to offer to the planners. These pertain to the use of ideological input in the decisions about the 'planning brief' for a new city, the social background and values of the planners, the need of people's involvement in the plan formulation and in the implementation process - to frustrate diabolical designs of the vested interests later - and periodical appraisal of the execution of new city's plans by a larger group of planners, consisting of professionals with clean image.

IV : Flaws in Traditional Urban Planning Theory

In the backdrop of issues posed in the first three sections, we may now examine some built-in flaws in the traditional urban planning theory. This is essential if we want to use urbanisation, as a process, and urban planning as a conscious device to promote development which ensures equality. Space constraint precludes a discussion of a large number of flaws in the traditional theory of urban planning : this section, consequently, concerns itself only with four among them.

- (a) One of the fundamentals in the traditional theory is the hierarchy of functions. This hierarchy is operationally linked with the commercial values of the places resulting in location of all higher order functions in what are described as the Central Business Districts (CBDs). Theoretically, it is argued that clustering of all higher order functions in one single place is cost-effective (i.e. time, money, convenience). However, the methodology used to measure cost-effectiveness is always biased, and half-cocked: it concerns itself with the effectiveness of this system to the top bracket (in the government, business indeed almost every sphere) only. It coolly ignores what happens in the process to those who service this class - those who constitute a staggering majority. Clustering of higher order functions is very costly and inconvenient to 99% and more of the population. Why centralization of higher order functions - which starts a chain of trouble for the others - should then be attempted at all ? Logic and rationality do not decide such crucial dimensions : power-economic, political - does it tantalizingly. An inevitable consequence of this rule has been, as pointed out earlier, the tendency to force the poor, helpless people to come to the so-called 'central places' to avail the services and facilities. The facilities

themselves do not go to them. What we are emphasizing is 'master-servant relationship' involved in this system. The masters' here do not leave much of a choice to the 'servants' to have facilities that they need : they are made to adjust to what they want the latter to avail and that too at places which are not so convenient to them.

(b) Traditional urban planning theory has assumed utilization of total available land for different functions separately in certain proportions. It does not provide for trade off of various functions even though it is fairly well known that the various areas of the same city develop at different speeds and as the city reaches a certain size the appreciation in the commercial values of land bring tremendous amount of pressure to change defined land uses. It so turns out that the most severely affected plots in such cases are those earmarked for the poor people and/or for social services and amenities. If the commercial interests fail to appropriate such plots, they change the land use of certain other plots, designated for some other function under the planning theory. It is always the poor people who have to suffer in such cases.

It is difficult to imagine that these theorists are so naive as to totally ignore these possibilities. The fact is that this calculated theoretical divorce from the realities provides a decided advantage to the elitist class which stands to gain through changes which subsequently take place in a city's development history. It is precisely for this reason that those who control urban development do not initiate steps which may put an effective halt to a city's growth beyond a point.

(c) Traditional urban planning theory treats city planning mainly as an exercise in physical planning. As a result, the human, social and economic aspects get relatively ignored and cause untold miseries to the urban population. It is in this context that the formation of slums, natural development of industrial suburbs, spontaneous development of commercial centres on the one hand, and the slum clearance, fostered industrial development and artificial commercial centres on the other has to be viewed. ^{31/} In the planning of a new city or in the recasting of an old one, this tendency forces choices which emphasize the visual aspect - which pleases the eye - and tends to ignore aspects which affect the wherewithal, the body, heart and the soul of the majority. Day in and day out more money seems to

31 Delhi's recent and not so recent events linked with these natural and artificial processes may be recalled here.

be available for the former than the latter. In a country where roughly half the population lives below the poverty line, this is very shattering news. And yet, it is forgotten and ignored with ridiculous ease.

(d) Traditional urban planning theory has developed the practice of providing a single identity to a city. It goes without saying that a city can not hope to remain so after a certain stage and has to acquire several such identities at a later stage. While it is fine to give a certain flavour to urbanization in a city in its initial phase, overemphasis in doing so creates a lot of problems for the subsequent periods. These problems are not necessarily spatial alone : they could well be socio-cultural. In behavioural terms, these have caused uncalculated damage to the economic, and political systems.

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